

MAIN STREET, SEAL BEACH

it's gray outside grandma's candies.
i don't think grandma owns it anymore.
i heard she sold out after last st. patrick's day
when the police clubbed her on the head.

i didn't know her.
i just remember she was very fat.
i knew a girl once worked for her
and didn't like her.

i don't know john
of john's food king supermarket.
i think he sold out too.
the prices are high but the cashier's lines are short.

i don't know walt of walt's wharf
or vinzant of vinzant's varieties.
i heard he's selling also.
i don't know babe of babe's shoe repair.

i've met clancy of clancy's bar twice
and both times he has tried to squash my hand.
mostly his kid runs the bar now.
the irisher is owned by someone of central european
extraction.

i know sonny but his liquor store is now called
l and w supply.
i know kay, but her pre-school
is called the peppermint.

they all deserve novels,
all the old-towners.
but i don't think any of them will be here long.
the street is torn up and a sign says: coming seal
beach mall.

this was what the american dream could have been,
the neighborliness of a small town without
narrowmindedness.
good schools, good-times, old-timers, kids.
a can of beer, volleyball on the beach, parties, privacy.

shop by shop, the money will move in.
main street will be another "old town" in quotation marks.
they'll make the little people offers that they
can't refuse
and raise the rents to what i can't afford.

these aren't the people i can write about.
they have their chroniclers, the guys on the bestseller
lists.
america, the indians at least demanded beads.

THE POETRY CONTEST

A few years ago a friend and former student of mine
who is now chairman of a local high school English
department
was asked by a citizen's group to find a judge for
their poetry contest.

He got in touch with me.

Most of the poems were predictable expressions
of first love, patriotic ardor, and ecological concern.

But one young math student
had gained access to the school-district computer.
He fed it whatever Alpo those things devour
and turned it loose.

It came up with a lot of great lines.
The one that's always stuck with me
was, "The bird flies backwards into the barn."

Within that congestion of circuitry
lurked the soul of a Rimbaud.

Programmed, you say?

It was much less programmed
than the minds of the high school students.

If I could have wooed that computer
I would have married it.
It would have been my Sylvia Plath.
Our life together would of course have ended tragically.
Since it would easily have out-imaged me,
I would have been forced to drive it to suicide.

At any rate, I awarded he/she/it First Prize.

I haven't been asked to judge a contest since then.